

# Review: The Ship by Antonia Honeywell: Review by Allen Stroud

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## Review : The Ship by Antonia Honeywell

From the outside, Antonia Honeywell's debut novel has a similar dystopian premise to most of the popular Clarke Award nominees of 2015. Comparisons to Emily St. John Mandell's *Station Eleven* have been made elsewhere, but the two stories are very different takes on humanity's struggles in a post-apocalyptic future.

Honeywell's premise is realised with a narrow focus. The world has suffered an agricultural meltdown. Gradually, less and less food is being produced. Our storyteller, Lalla, is raised by her mother in London, with occasional visits from her father, Michael who is part of a failing rescue effort to restore society. Eventually, matters come to a head on night and Lalla's parents argue over leaving the city to the mysterious *ship* of the title. Tragedy occurs and the matter is forced. The ship sets sail and Lalla finds herself in a new life, far from the one she knew.

The most interesting scene of the entire story is the resolution of this tragedy and the complicity of Lalla in what happens.

In one sense, Honeywell's ship is a modern Ark, planned and provisioned for an escape from the decaying remains of our future. However, this escape is a sterile one. The five hundred allowed to go find themselves with no destination other than the ship itself. Provisions and supplies have been accrued so that the vessel can maintain itself for twenty years or more, providing nirvana for its desperate inhabitants who soon begin to revere their deliverer, Michael, as something more than a mortal man. In a way, the premise of this is a thought experiment, the classic thought experiment, Plato's Cave. Men, women and children are brought into a nautical world where the meagre things they fought for are bounteous and right at their fingertips. This is a transformed reality, which they try to make sense of at first, through the prism of their previous experiences by sharing them, but later by rejecting these experiences and thinking only of the present.

It is here that the sterile world of *The Ship* reveals its curse. Its people have found an idyll, all except Lalla, who yearns for the British Museum and her trips there with her mother. She struggles to accept the new nautical nirvana, where she is daughter of the people's deity, at first she misses the familiar things, but later questions the uncompromising authority of her father, who in her previous life, had been questioned continuously by her mother. Lalla sees through the charade and resents the paradise bought by denying the starving back in London and the rest of the United Kingdom. As Michael urges the people to forget their past, Lalla looks for resistance. At times, we think she has found it, but each clue is a false trail and each sympathetic ear leads her back towards soporific acceptance.

This is the frustration of the story. Lalla's continual quest comes across as petulant and moody, particularly when her head is turned by her boyfriend, Tom. At times, she abandons her principles and whilst this might be a level of appropriate angst for a teenager, learning to become an adult, it undermines our connection with her. Similarly, this is not really a dystopian story from the Science Fiction genre and so the plot points you might expect do not lead to the crises or social commentary a genre reader might expect.

*The Ship* is an unsettling book, full of frustrations. There are many things to like about the ideas contained within these pages, but many of them remain unrealised. There are moments when the

components sync together to create a genuinely unique and breath-taking story, but these are fleeting. And the conclusion, whilst empowering for Lalla, is ultimately frustrating for the reader as she departs into the unknown.